Lateral
JOURNAL OF THE CULTURAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION

lewis levenberg, "Review of 'Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance' by Curtis Marez (University of Minnesota Press)," *Lateral 8.2* (2019).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.2.13

Book Reviews
Issue 8.2 (Fall 2019)

Review of *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance* by Curtis Marez (University of Minnesota Press)

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ABSTRACT In this focused visual-cultural history of farm work in California over the course of the twentieth century, Curtis Marez draws on a materialist and critical approach to understand the representations, in various media and formats, of farm workers, and of the activist movements that they have championed. Marez frames analyses of cultural artifacts, including speculative and science-fiction books and films, documentaries, propaganda, and studio artworks, in the historical and material conditions of those farm workers' movements. Throughout, he foregrounds the people who shaped modern labor movements, from the vineyards of the San Fernando and San Joaquin Valleys and beyond. Marez argues that competing material interests, socio-technical mediations, and historical conditions—the animating conflicts of this account, between agribusiness and farm laborers—have shaped broader expressions of "americanism", imagined futures, and visual cultures across North American societies, through the very contradictions that animate and constitute them.

Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance. By Curtis Marez. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 211 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-8166-9745-8. US List: $25.00.

In this focused visual-cultural history of farm work in California over the course of the twentieth century, Curtis Marez introduces "speculative history" to his examination of "migrant labor techno-culture[s] of time-space compression." (50) These high-flying conceptual interventions draw on a fundamentally materialist and critical approach to understand the representations, in various media and formats, of farm workers, and of the activist movements that they have championed. Marez frames analyses of cultural artifacts, including speculative and science-fiction books and films, documentaries, propaganda, and studio artworks, in the historical and material conditions of those farm workers' movements. Throughout, he foregrounds the *people* who shaped modern labor movements, from the vineyards of the San Fernando and San Joaquin Valleys and beyond. Marez argues that competing material interests, socio-technical mediations, and historical conditions—the animating conflicts of this account, between agribusiness and farm laborers—have shaped broader expressions of "americanism" (104), imagined futures, and visual cultures across North American societies, through the very contradictions that animate and constitute them.

This leads to a core claim of the book: that futurity, as imagined by labor movements throughout and beyond twentieth-century Californian agricultural work, is both *critical and conservative* at once. (10) The argument proves both strong and subtle. Its import is clearest where Marez overlays archival analyses of specific artifacts and collections with corresponding interactions between people and events in linear, observable historical moments such as strikes. This specificity, in turn, supports the broader periodic themes

that Marez introduces in each chapter, by articulating the labor movements' structures and ideals in the context of their representation, especially their visual representations. In each chapter, he compellingly contrasts farm workers' imaginative futurity, of a world of open possibilities, with the prescriptive futurism exemplified by proto-fascist agribusinesses, from as early as the late nineteenth century, to its corresponding expression in the Silicon Valley tech bubble's treatment of its blue-collar workers in the early twenty-first. (11)

Early on in the text, Marez shows how agricultural technologies have been repeatedly and consciously *weaponized* by farm owners and corporate interests, stretching back at least to the 1800s on the West Coast of the US. His examples include specific uses of factories, tractors, robots, pesticides, and the short-handled hoe wielded by braceros. They include cases of both deliberate attacks, and of instrumental negligence, always in pursuit of control of the people and organizations on whose labor the agricultural economy relies. Further, though, Marez compellingly argues that the "exploitation of farm workers depends on technologically mediated forms of visual culture." (80) To support this claim, he provides rich examples of the visual representation of "stoop labor" in science fiction and in early agribusiness and union media, emphasizing how the top-down and wide-angle visual fields correspond to owners' perspectives, whereas bottom-up views or close-ups of workers reinforce the human scale of labor.

As he introduces threads of argumentation that will carry throughout the book, Marez also marks the conceptual dichotomies to which he will continually return. Farm labor plays the critical role in producing exploited profit for agribusiness, but is simultaneously erased by those businesses' visual and cultural productions. Unionization impacts farm workers from the start, and has a rich, proud history that spans ethnic, national, and industrial lines—but the same labor unions (after an initial catastrophic failure on the part of the United Cannery Workers' strike in the early 1900s) explicitly rejected communism as a guiding ideology. And unions' deeply held "Americanness," set against the simultaneous "foreignness" of farm laborers' images, leads to unions expressing complex, and sometimes internally contradictory, ideals of work, liberty, and future society. As Marez shows throughout the work, representation of farm workers tends to draw on imagery and concepts of class, race, sexuality, and technology, in addition to those of agricultural labor as such.

That conflict of ideals carries through the post-World War II period, in which farm laborers organized more actively than they had before, especially against the promotion of rapid, dehumanizing automation. Marez identifies "corporate control of visual technologies" on the rise in this period, through which an agribusiness gaze exemplified media representations of farm workers. (77) These linked, systemic drives towards domination had particularly strong roots in visual and rhetorical imagery of whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity. A paradigmatic romanticization of small family farms (especially white nuclear families) is reflected not just in corporate propaganda but also in science fiction of the time, effacing the actual work being done to make large agricultural corporations profitable, by Latinx, Asian, Black, and White laborers alike.

But neither narratives of possible futures, nor the appropriation of visual technologies, remains the exclusive domain of business interests. Marez introduces the world-building approach of the United Farm Workers, and the mass appeal of Cesar Chavez's and Dolores Huerta's direct actions, as ideologically and iconographically rooted in earlier groups, like the National Farm Laborers Union led by Ernesto Galarza. Union propaganda films such as *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*, *Fighting for our Lives*, or the *Wrath of Grapes* exposed, through direct visual representation, both the conditions of labor in California's agricultural industry, and the development of what Marez terms "farm fascism." Successes

for progressive politics in this field, such as these media, strikes, and fasts, were tempered by Cold War "Americanist" anticommunism, and by strong Catholic traditions among farm workers. Marez does not flinch from describing the "contradictory consequences of the UFW's efforts to critically analyze and intervene in just such an agribusiness-dominated visual field" as mass media. (83) Those consequences include the expression of a patriotic imagined future, steeped in progressive ideals, but rooted in selective traditions contemporaneous to the Cold War, the farm workers' movement, and coincident articulations of patriotism.

This constitutive contradiction carries through the book's later chapters. It informs Marez's observations on how speculative culture has interacted with farm worker art movements through the late twentieth century. In perhaps the most memorable analysis in the book, Marez locates *Star Wars*'s operatic origins in the struggles of workers against large corporate interests in the 20th century Californian agricultural economy. Marez also details the racialized visual vernacular of the saga, by noting that the agrarian populism of the movies comes by way of the "animating absence" of migrant laborers. He makes the curious claim that Darth Vader represents Cesar Chavez, for Lucas—a claim backed by close attention to those racialized visual cues, and to the strength/weakness paradox applied by anti-union propaganda to Chavez, but ignoring the role that Vader plays as the enforcer of a hegemonic, oppressive government, precisely in opposition to a popular movement. In this way, says Marez, "the history of pre-digital race and labor formations continues to influence contemporary culture, starting with Lucas's own digital filmmaking," and culminating in the transformation undergone by Lucas himself, "from rebellious farm boy to the head of a vast corporate empire." (135–41) Marez sets this telling of conservative, nativist, corporatization against examples of populist and resistant artwork by Ester Hernandez. The close readings of her calaveras, images of Huerta, and especially her famous Sun Mad poster design, provide the avenue into Marez's critique of a consistent undercurrent, in the late twentieth century, of corporate visual media to subsume both agrarian workers' visual representations, and their material conditions of labor.

Those patterns of corporate subsumption of visual media extend through the early twenty-first century, as Marez argues in the afterword. Ideology and visual technique—such as "family farm" or "artisanal" iconography and branding—are deployed by large corporate entities precisely in order to co-opt reactionary, racialized mediations of white populism. (134) But Marez also shows how the "legacies of the historical farm worker movement" extend "beyond the fields, in the context of new labor systems and new labor movements," to influence not only 21st century speculative fiction, but also Silicon Valley labor movements. Tracing this legacy through examples of speculative and science-fiction works about labor, empire, movement, and natural resources, Marez identifies common themes of individualism, ethics, and humanism, as set against corporate homogeneity, instrumental rationality, and technocracies. (110) He then homes in on the material gains of contemporary labor organizations born from earlier farm workers' movements, showing how mobile phone usage in immigrants' rights protests mirrors the distributed communications strategies of earlier huelgas. He delves into the questions of labor and exploitation at the heart of Silicon Valley, including those surrounding computer hardware production, the successful janitors' strike against Apple, and the ongoing organization of IT workers. In the final pages, futurity as imagined by agricultural and post-agricultural workers' movements re-emerges as a potential space of resolution of perpetual struggles: between labor and capital, between tradition and progress, between one path of progress and another. In this way, Marez concludes with a clear example of his concept of "speculative history," adding poetic flourish to his trenchant analyses.

Throughout this volume, Marez demonstrates with fluent confidence how one holds a contradiction in the mind. The reader benefits immensely from Marez's ability to patiently and honestly examine apparent paradoxes—and to extricate nuanced and delicate truths from that approach. Occasionally, such as in the reading of Vader as Chavez, Marez reaches a touch too far, showcasing his talent for evocative juxtaposition when it cuts free of the gravity of his critical analysis. Even in these situations, the book's prose remains clear and precise, and the reader never loses sight of the relevant concepts, artifacts, people, or events in question. This is especially apparent in the book's recurring argument, that futures imagined by farm worker movements have consistently held both *critical* and *conservative* ideals at the same time. In plumbing this complex concept's rationales and contexts, Marez articulates a novel critical intervention with careful archival work. He shows that the workers whose movements he studies have not consolidated around a simplistic, unified identity. Rather, these workers have developed a fragmentation of subalternities, each with its own means and style of self-representation. From myriad media and historical records, produced by and about a multifaceted, often-conflicting cacophany of workers' voices—each clamoring for attention, and fighting off the silences imposed by agribusiness' interests—Marez has deftly underscored the harmonies that resonate across modern and contemporary labor movements, marching towards an uncertain, often dangerous future without losing hope.

Bio

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ISSN 2469-4053